Transcript of interview, Bob and Tiny Buzby with Kathy Price
27 September 2001
Buzby residence, Wasilla, AK.
Prepared for U.S. Army Alaska Ft. Wainwright homestead study
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Misc. introductory remarks

BB: OK, I'll have to go back. My father came to Alaska to Nome in 1900. After that he went to Skagway and then helped build the railroad from Skagway to Whitehorse. He ended up coming down to Fairbanks and he homesteaded in Fairbanks in l905, and I was born in 1911 in Fairbanks. I was the youngest of the family. After a trip to California, then Tillamook OR, and then my dad rounded up a bunch of dairy cattle and brought em to Fairbanks. So we had a 1926 - early 30s we had a dairy in Fairbanks and my job was raising hay & delivering door to door the old-fashioned way. And once upon a time I thought I knew everyone in Fairbanks. Now it's a rare occasion to meet anyone I know. Anyway, this homestead he took in 1905 was where I grew up after a while and . . . eventually the military bought our place, my dad's place, we had another place by that time . . . it became Ladd Field, and Ladd Field now is Wainwright.

Tape off.

KP: question about the rest of the family

BB: I was the youngest of four boys and two girls. I had two sisters, my oldest sister had a daughter who's fifteen months younger 'n I was. My older sister died in a car wreck going from Los Angeles to San Diego. And all my brothers have done their thing in their own way. I'm the only one who's still living of the family, the original family. And I married Tiny 68 years ago.

KP: Did you live together on the homestead at all?

TB: Yes, we lived on the homestead for several years, until Ladd Field took it over, then we moved off.

BB: This growing up in Alaska, I became an Alaskan, and I've stayed that way. They call them pioneers now, in the . . . when I started school, I had dogs. We were two miles from town, and I used a coupla dogs to…things at school when I was 7 yrs old. I gravitated into dog mushing. And then you gotta jump way ahead to in the 30s. I won the major dog race in Fairbanks 3 years in a row. (TB: the Signal Corps trophy.) From that, I retired one of the finest cups ever put into dogdom. It was known as the Signal Corps trophy. The Signal Corps was the military of the country at the time that we had the first phones and they were the ones that took care of all the long distance calls and things of that kind. They were military and they took the little deal out of the people that worked for them to pay for that trophy, and it was a beautiful thing. My daughter Alice, who's here now, it's in her possession. In winning that three times in a row, I retired the trophy. One of the interesting episodes of dog mushing, I won the third time with seven dogs against teams with twelve. The famous man whose picture's everywhere around the country, Leonard Seppala, he had a team, he had a twelve-dog team. There was a man in Fairbanks who had a dog that Seppala had in his team. The man that drove his team, was not a friend, but anyway, Seppala's team, they thought that they would hurt me because we lived on the trail out

of Fairbanks to Valdez, 2 miles out, and they run that 80 miles [of the race] by going past my home. They thought that would be a little problem for me. It didn't work out that way. Cause my dogs were trained on a trap line and they knew what it was like to do what I had to do. Seppala's dogs was all trained in town and the road was to our place two miles. We kept the road, the Valdez trail, open that far, I'm just talking about dog mushing; we went to Salcha and back, Salchaket they called it in that day. My father-in-law, Tiny's dad, had a place in town, he had a shop, where he did blacksmithing and that sort of stuff and we fixed up [in] his shop a place for my dogs and they had straw to lay on and they, when they come in they relaxed, and it was a good thing. Well naturally when I come by my home two miles out of town, my dogs knew the one in town was where we was going to end up, and they never even hesitated. But Seppala's team saw broken road then and they thought they were home and they quit at my place. And this man that was driving 'em, you know, instead of using some brains, he started licking 'em and then that's no way to treat a dog. They ended up sending a truck out and hauling 'em in those last two miles. You don't see that picture among his collection down there in Knik . . .

KP: Can I ask you a little bit about the road, the Fairbanks-Valdez trail, did it run right through your property then?

BB: Yes. Paralleling the bank of the Chena River through there. Our home was between the trail and the river. So it was more or less dependent on the road for everything except the river, *TB: (comments not picked up)* and it may be of interest to some people, that the river was the place where the early planes with floats landed.

KP: Question about floatplanes, brother Elton in Jean tester's book, talked about floatplane base there on river. Wondered where that was?

TB: It's no longer there, of course because (sound lost) . . . Wiley Post and Will Rogers landed there when they went on the last trip that killed them (sound lost) they took off from there.

BB: Yea, when Will Rogers and Wiley Post, they did not have what they should have had to make such a trip as they planned to make. So they, Post took off from our place, and they landed at Harding Lake and that's where Post ah, (TB: they refueled there) got aboard. That was their last landing. They, when they went to Barrow, before they got to Barrow they had to land a little ways out of town, and that's where they got wrecked.

(misc not transcribed)

KP: Everyone in Fairbanks took that pretty hard, from what I understand. Question on what floatplane base consisted of.

TB: It was just the river, and there was a little float, you know, really just a boat landing, but the planes tied up to it too. It was just where we landed our boats.

BB: The river at the place was best straight shot that they had. Everything else around was too many bends.

KP: Was there a lot of float traffic coming through

TB: Not a lot, it was a little spot at that time.

BB: Pacific international airways, (?) was the first. They had 4 airplanes, they had the first mail contracts out of Fairbanks down the Yukon, and as it happened, I worked for them taking mail, weigh mail with the dogs, and that was an interesting year or two; that was in 1931. I don't know if that had anything to do with it but I ended up becoming a pilot myself and flew 15 years. I had a trap line all my life and I guided big game hunters for 55 years. I did some flying for myself, and I flew for Shell Oil the first year they came to AK on the west side of Cook Inlet.

Tape off.

BB: My life began when we got the dairy because delivering milk in bottles to houses was the way it was done. There were three dairies in Fairbanks of which we were one of them. The usual thing was delivered with a horse and wagon in summer and sled in winter, and eventually we had a vehicle as well and that was a good vehicle, a 1914 Dodge. (laughs)

KP: question on keeping milk warm

TB: They had hay in the sled and blankets over the top and everything and heaters around so that it stayed warm.

KP: question on size of cowherd?

BB: Oh, I don't know. We always had about a dozen milking, and we were always raising a few. One incident which might not be of interest to some people but it was to me, we had a bull that was Jersey and not the petting kind, and my dad was riding a horse, driving the cattle in and this bull gored the horse, right in the chest. Upended him, and knocked my dad of course ended up on the ground. I had the ability or the privilege, what ever you want to call it; I killed that bull the next day. The remedy for such a thing as that, my dad went in and got a part of a sack of flour and filled that wound in the horse with flour, and that was probably a couple of months before that horse was usable . . . but he did recover.

KP: About how old were you then?

BB: I don't know. We still had the dairy; I think that I was probably a dozen years old, at that time. I never knew, of course nobody would have suspected, that that accident with the bull throwing my dad off the horse and as a result of it he had a stroke about two weeks after that. It may have been the cause of the stroke. But anyway, after my dad died, we sold the dairy. There was a family in Nome that had a cow and they got a lot of our bottles. You might find a Buzby bottle in Nome yet today.

KP: I wasn't too sure what years the dairy was operating? Maybe I'm not too clear; when your dad came and started the homestead, he didn't start the dairy end of it right away; that was later, right?

BB: No, that was later, yes.

TB: What year?

BB: 1926, early thirties.

TB: So you were more than twelve, when that bull accident happened.

BB: Well, I was born in '11, why, I was growing up, and as I mentioned I trapped a little all my life.

KP: Were you doing that from the house on the homestead, initially?

Redirect conversation to the farming

BB: Naturally with that many head of cattle, we had to raise a lot of hay. That was always part of my job. My brother, I only had one brother that was born in Alaska, two years older than I was. He worked in town for money. He worked at the NC Company for a number of years. My oldest brother was agent at Manley Hot Springs for the NC Company for, eight years, I think. 1931, when I drove my dogs hauling mail from Nenana and I always left Nenana with 800 pounds, and I had nine dogs. My job was hauling mail as far as Ruby, and then the airplanes were getting into action, and they'd pick up the mail from there. I had a wheelbarrow-load of Sears Roebuck catalogs that I'd drop off at Ruby and they'd pick em up to take em the rest of the way.

KP: questions re homestead location, size, referring to maps

TB: The Buzby dairy, his father sold him that.

KP: more questions about map, the slough.

BB: Homesteads then was 320 acres. This part here is where our home was. *(indicating map)*

KP: So the house was right there by the river. *Dis 'n of where Richardson Hwy was.*

BB: Actually, the road . . . this part here was in field. The slough came in right below our home. We always had a fishnet in there. That was a normal thing, those days.

KP: question re house itself (TB also asks)

BB: It was a log house, you would find nowadays, it's probably a three-room equivalent. It was one, with another one added on, typical.

KP: Your dad built that, your brothers helped him build it . . . ?

BB: My dad and I were the dairymen. My mother of course took care of the milk once it got in the house. I did the delivering. We sold cream by the pint, and butter, and eggs, and the usual.

KP: Where was the barn in relation to the house and other buildings?

BB: Log house. Barn was not fastened to the house. One barn for the chickens and another one for the cattle.

TB: Wasn't that a different piece of land though? Didn't you buy somebody else's homestead when you came back from Outside with your dairy cattle?

BB; Yes. This was my dad's acreage. And we bought the land right adjoining it from the Joy family. Lou Joy, that's, he was in the several, I don't know how many years, he was in the school

system. There is a school named for Lou Joy. *(misc questions)* We bought the Lou Joy place. That was adjoining my dad's place. It was also on the bank of the river.

KP: Was it your sister who married the Spencer, which was also an adjacent property?

TB: I think maybe that was part of the Buzby and they just gave them, I'm not sure. Did Chester have a homestead there, too?

BB: Yes, he filed on a piece between us, between the Joy home and my dad's place. Naturally, that was two miles from town, that was along ways out, and the ladies used to come out and commiserate with my mother for having to live so far from town.

KF: comments on most homesteaders being single men, family life probably difficult.

TB: You had to be a pretty dedicated person to be willing to do that. And she was.

BB: Well I wouldn't know of any particular things of interest that anybody would find.

TB: Tell her about the big mill they had for processing the wheat and making flour.

BB: That was history, I guess. They had the flourmill shipped into Fairbanks and my mother to decorate the system. She took wheat from the first that the flourmill was able to make and she made little loaves of bread, I don't know, several hundred of them, probably (TB: for what?) For whoever wanted them, just to show they could do it. And of course my dad always had a good garden and the family always had garden forever.

TB: They had a fair.

BB: They had a fair. Naturally they had a fair.

KP: What type of produce were you growing in the garden?

BB: Well, I know it was a lot of work. (TB: What kind of vegetables did you grow?) All of it. All the hardy vegetables. And we had a greenhouse. Tomatoes and cucumbers and lettuce, stuff like that in the greenhouse

KP: Did you sell that in town, also, like you did with the dairy products?

BB: Sold it to anybody that wanted it. And there was the first fairs my dad was one of the principal people involved in having one. I remember one little incident there that wouldn't be any fun for anybody else, but he took some of the dairy cattle to the fair and they had a butcher doing the judging. Made my dad mad and he took the cows home!

Being on the river, we always had boats, and I built a few boats. And my brother was a good boat builder, and we had one of the first, for a while the only boat with a . . . tunnel boat. The tunnel comes from the bow back to the motor and then to the stern to the rudder and so on, and this would allow you to go in the shallowest of water, because it didn't draw any more water running than it did sitting. And that was, my brother built the boat, about thirty feet long, thirty two feet long, and I had enough money, I had bought a…The NC Company was agents for Chrysler and I bought a Chrysler marine engine for that, which was a wonderful boat. There was another coupla boats built similar to that, but they didn't know what we knew, to build that boat proper. It had to

be airtight, the tunnel. People didn't know that, and when you leave it set overnight, that water was still up in the tunnel in the morning, and people didn't know that, and one of the first ones copied our boat went down the river and then they had to be towed back up cause they didn't know that they could keep it running.

KP: question on boat

BB: Our riverboats was designed originally back East, and they were about twenty-four foot for an average in length, and eventually they were, what do you call them, poling boats, but eventually we got outboard motors. But they were kinda slow to take over, and because . . . I have to jump over the fence a little bit, now. The sawmill at the edge of town got the timber up the Chena River and drove the logs down the river, and they don't permit that anymore because it might be something in the, hurt the water. But anyway, Fairbanks was built by logs that I helped cut a lot of 'em, and I drove, I probably drove more logs than any one person down there, to the mill.

KP: question about homesteads and demand for wood, did homesteaders cut for mills, did others come out, was it cooperative thing?

TB: Wood was your heat. In the winter you had to have wood. And that's what a lot of people did. A lot of people worked when they could in the summer at whatever was open, like road commission, things like that. And then in the winter, they went and got wood and hauled it in, because they could, because of the snow, for the people to use for the year.

BB: I can show you houses today in Fairbanks that we, . . . lumber, that we supplied.

KP: Was that from your homestead property or just from places on up the river?

BB: Up and down the river. Anywhere the timber would grow. A bend in the river, would be full of timber. And then there might be a straight stretch, and another bend in the river, there' d be more timber. So, in our logging, we stacked the logs on the bank of the river, and then in the spring after the ice went out, we'd drive it to the mill. Eventually I logged for the first military district engineers bought the mill. I logged for them, then.

KP: Was that when Ladd Field came in?

BB: Yup. There's many little things, that by the time you talk about it it'd take three days, but the timber: spruce, live spruce timber is what we . . . didn't use dead, always the green logs that we drove.

KP: questions re first year or two of Ladd construction, any recollections

BB: This contract that I had with them, I logged with some of the old-timers and used horses for skidding. The military used the first chain saws, and trucks and cats and thirty men and at the end of that contract I supplied a million and a half feet of timber to the mill the old way using the has-beens, while they had all the young good workingmen working for them. Well, I did a million and a half feet for them. While I did that, with all their equipment they got six hundred thousand feet.

KP: So you knew what you were doing!

BB: Fairbanks was built on the material that we supplied before the military' came.

KP: question about time on property right before Ladd Field came in, how heard about it coming

TB: Well, they sent people up to look, you know, and of course you knew . . . we heard about of course all the unrest in Europe and war and all that kind of stuff and so what we were doing was just exactly what everybody did: we worked in the summers when there were jobs for cash and then we, whatever else we could do we did to keep on living; like we trapped and we logged and we did things like that and then we could sell that in the spring or whenever, and that's how we lived. People didn't really have much of any money until after Ladd Field came and established a payroll, because there was just the FE Company, the NC Company and two or three little grocery stores and things like that and that's all… oh, the ACS . . . that had an income. The rest of us were lived there because we liked to live there. We sent our kids to school, and they walked and didn't mind and now they do. They like to have a bus! I don't know, as I think back on it, why I don't know, because there really wasn't much of anything to do. We had to make our own amusement and we had to enjoy what was there and that's what it was. But it was then a beautiful place and it's still a beautiful place, in spite of their best efforts!

KP: questions re subdivided areas, Ladd expansions

TB: That's when they *[Fbks area?]* more or less expanded out to Fox, and down towards Ester and through there is where little people could buy a lot or a couple of acres, before that you . . .

BB: In the early days, the river was the prime condition for everybody to travel. I've known a couple that lived sixty miles up the river that whip sawed lumber and built their own boat to travel with, and this was a normal thing. Poling boats is exactly what they were. You poled your way up the river; of course you could always paddle down,

KP: stories or recollections about neighboring homesteaders

Tape off.

BB: We had a ball game, Fourth of July.

KP: Did they do the Midnight Sun baseball games, back then, too?

TB: Yes. Midnight sun baseball, it was.

BB: The Fourth of July was a day when the miners had a day off. Us kids helped clear the brush for Weeks Field. Weeks Field became first airport in Fairbanks. In fact, I learned to fly at Weeks Field. It was made for a ball game, where they could play baseball. Maybe they'd have a gunny sack race for the kids, or something, you know.

Passing pictures from Elton Buzby article in Lester 's book.

BB: The greenhouse. That was the year I was born.

Tape off.

BB: My brother joined WWI in Portland. He didn't want to do it in Alaska, because in Alaska they didn't send em anyplace, except down the river, Tanana, someplace, you know. He went to Portland at his own expense, or my dad's own expense. He walked to Valdez, but he had his duffel bag on the . . . . *(mentions a book, loaned out)* The Ed Orr was a man who had several teams of horses, traveling from Valdez to Fairbanks. In this book, he advertised Valdez to Fairbanks in eight days!

Misc comments

BB: That picture was taken when the FE company was building the pipeline. Bear on the grader.

Tape off.

BB: Ira Schultz. *(referring to photo caption)*

KP: in this picture, working for the NC Co., looks like.

TB: I don't know when, because he lived in the mountains almost all the time. Bob has this picture of him with a couple sheep, and they're rams, and they're both dead, frozen solid, and he has em standing up and he's standing with em with the picture.

BB: (returning with sheep photo) In those days you were allowed two sheep, and these were frozen and he just stood em up to take a picture!

Tape off.

KP: question on family leaving and returning

TB: When your folks left and went out that time, did they sell out here then, or did they keep that property?

BB: They sold it and got it back. Meantime we bought the Lou Joy place, and moved the dairy up there.

K.P: That explains why the homestead title actually went to someone else, and not the Buzby family.

BB: Time, as we set here, looking back at time, what happened when, you can't fill it out, you've got to jump from now to what it was when you remembered it last, and it wasn't the way it was when you first knew it. Just like when I was going to school, my dad was a hunter, a hunter for the markets. Usually to prospectors, to the miners. He had my two brothers with him, and the principal of the school was going to have him arrested for having the kids out of school, so they sent me to school to take up the slack. (Laughs.) That's when I started school, and the reason for it. But I was taught at home, and the result was that I was ahead of the kids in school. Because I was seven years old, first grade was just kind of forgotten and I was put into second grade and my brother who was older than me, when he did come back and go to school, they put him in the third so we wouldn't be both in the same grade. This added up that, we went outside in 1921, my brother and I, with our parents. And the railroad wasn't finished. We went from Healy to Curry by dog team. That cost my dad three hundred bucks for use of a dog team.

TB: Tell them about Hurricane Gulch.

BB: Well, there's Hurricane Gulch down there that now has a big bridge across it. Those days we went down the gulch this way *(gestures sideways),* and up the other side, with the dogs. Anymore, you go on that bridge, look down, you can see down there, but you can't imagine anybody ever being down there.

Before the railroad was built, we got everything by boat in the summer. Horses from Valdez in the Valdez winter. The way our cattle come, when the railroad was built was our cows come in by boat to Valdez [Seward?] and then when they got em off the cars there in Fairbanks, just drove em through town and on out.

KP: wrap ups, would anyone like to add anything

TB: Yes, I would. Cause this has been about him and that's right, because I came pretty late in life, but we have four children, 19 grandchildren, 16 great-grandchildren, and one great-great grandson. So we're keeping Alaska well populated.

BB: comments on first trip outside, mother's health

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